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Waivers by Turner Stir C.I.A. Dispute Over Use of Polygraph Tests

By DAVID BINDER

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WASHINGTON, April 3 — A controversy has arisen within the Central Intelligence Agency over the use of polygraph tests to establish employee reliability since the Director of Central Intelligence, Adm. Stansfield Turner, waived standard procedures in two hiring cases, Carter Administration officials said today.

The C.I.A., with very few exceptions, has used the polygraph — popularly, though not quite accurately, known as the lie detector — for decades as a basic instrument to determine whether applicants were acceptable. The only exceptions traditionally have been the Director and his deputy, because they are Presidential appointees.

In the recent cases disclosed by officials, one applicant "did badly" on the polygraph but was waived in by Admiral Turner for a division chief's position on appeal by his patron, John E. Koehler, who is director for resources management of the Intelligence Community Staff.

The second applicant, who had previously been in military service, had declined to take the polygraph test on grounds that it violated his moral principles. The officials said that Admiral Turner had waived the polygraph examination in this case but had stipulated that the man not be given access to secret material above the classification grade he had in the military.

An agency spokesman acknowledged the Turner waivers today, saying the decisions were "up to the Director," and adding: "There's no great upheaval. It's between the Director and the security people. I don't know how unhappy they are. They might be. That's what they're paid for."

Other officials said that C.I.A. security officers were indeed very upset about what one termed "security breaches" by Admiral Turner and noted that the security branch had recommended that the applicant who "did badly" not be signed up by the agency.

The spokesman, and other officials pointed out that the polygraph test, as used by the C.I.A., was not a matter of passing or failing but rather a tool to alert security officials to potential problems.

In testimony four years ago before a House committee, Harold L. Brownman, then deputy to the Director for management and services, called the polygraph "a very useful adjunct to the security screening procedure." He pointed out that the agency, in a typical year, had registered 152 "security disapprovals" of which 134 had been "either triggered by or totally substantiated by the use of polygraph."

Various Factors Measured

Polygraph tests were developed largely in the United States by psychologists in the 1920's and involve multiple-pen instrument systems registering breathing pattern, blood pressure and

pulse and skin resistance to external pressure during interrogation.

The agency's 15,000 employees are routinely given polygraph tests in five-year cycles, officials noted, while in cases of suspected security risks or extremely sensitive assignments, extra tests are required.

The power of the polygraph was recently illustrated when an agency analyst was suspected of passing top secret strategic arms documents to Richard Perle, staff assistant of Senator Henry M. Jackson, the Washington Democrat. The analyst, David S. Sullivan, facing a routine polygraph exam last summer, blurted out a confession and was summarily dismissed.

Categories of Conduct

Examinees are routinely asked penetrating questions designed to provide indications of "any criminal, infamous, dishonest, immoral or notoriously disgraceful conduct, habitual use of intoxicants to excess, drug use or abuse, or sexual perversion," to name some of the C.I.A. categories.

In the case of the applicant who "did badly," Admiral Turner reportedly concluded that the question put to him had been unfair and he ordered a new test with a different set of questions and a different polygraph operator. The applicant is said to have performed "relatively better" on the second test.

The agency has maintained a staff of polygraph operators for some years who undergo up to seven weeks of training and a six-to-eight-month internship.

Five years ago there were moves in Congress to pass legislation abolishing the polygraph tests for C.I.A. applicants, but they foundered for lack of broad support.

The House Select Committee on Intelligence has begun a new investigation of internal security practices in the intelligence community, officials said, having learned that there is a wide divergence in screening procedures from agency to agency. Hearings by the Subcommittee on Oversight have been tentatively scheduled for later this month.